

Series Pilot Research: Space Force

**Introduction**

I want to tell a dramatic (but funny?), speculative fiction story in 10, 30-minute live-action episodes of a series that introduces a near-future world ripe for diegetic prototype building.

In researching the pilot episodes of contemporary speculative fiction series, I came across a few that really signifies many of the successful elements of the genre including *The Expanse*, *Solar Opposites*, *Homecoming*, and *Westworld*. *Tales from the Loop*, Amazon's new anthology science fiction show based on the artwork of Swedish painter Simon Stålenhag deserves an academic deep-dive for its skillful use of diegetic prototypes, alone. But each of these shows is very different from one another when considering format and genre. One is a comedy while the other is considered a thriller or drama or dramatic thriller. One is live-action, the other is animated. I would suggest that at their core, these stories are really about answering one all-consuming question: How do people live in the future? That question is also at the core of the stories that I write. A recent pilot that exemplifies many of the important topics in speculative fiction is from Netflix and is entitled, **Space Force**:

- Running time- 27–36 minutes
- Editor(s)- David Rogers Susan Vaill
- Camera setup- Single-camera
- Cinematography- Simon Chapman

*\*Synopsis (from the series page) of the pilot episode, cleverly named: "The Launch":*

Air Force Lieutenant General Mark Naird is promoted to full four-star general and is hoping to take over as the Chief of Staff of the Air Force. However, he is

appointed as the first Chief of Operations of the newest United States military branch: the United States Space Force. His family, including daughter Erin and wife Maggie, are relocated to Colorado. One year later, the Space Force is about to launch a new satellite called Epsilon 6 into orbit. The Space Force is disorganized and fledgling, Mark is constantly bombarded by obstacles and adversaries, Erin detests her new home, and Maggie is now in prison. Against the advice of his advisors and scientists, including Space Force scientist Dr. Adrian Mallory, Mark orders the launch of Epsilon 6. Despite initial concerns, and in front of a delegation of prominent members of Congress, Epsilon 6 successfully reaches orbit. Later that night, as Mark and Adrian celebrate, Mark, observing Epsilon 6 through a telescope, sees a Chinese satellite clip the solar panels, the satellite's only power source, putting Epsilon 6 in jeopardy.

## **Observations**

The very first shot of Space Force depicts a close up of an epaulet as a fourth star is pinned to it. A colorful patch of accomplishment and a few shiny pins signify that this figure belongs to an important military figure. A brassy tune, all horns, plays a patriotic under-ducked track just under the dialog: "Four Star general. There is no rank higher in the United States military." The 'normal' world and the characters are introduced in just the first few seconds by leveraging cultural signals such as music, costume, simple dialogue, and props. In the first seconds, the audience knows that the characters are in the White House, the title character is a high ranking military official, and the event is auspicious. Only a few people are in attendance, which his daughter mentions to him, which is an early sign of the changes that are starting to take place in the lives of these characters. Another sign is the rushing of his acceptance speech. He wanted to say more, perhaps he'd prepared a speech, but the Sec.Def. character impatiently hurries the general along.

In the first scene, in the first few minutes, the audience is introduced to important characters (Gen. Naird, his wife, daughter, Sec.Def.) through conflict. We can see a

normal, recognizable world with expectations that are being confounded. The Secretary of Defense is less formal than we might expect. Naird's daughter is perhaps irreverent. The gracious, inspiring speech was cut short. The procession of beats in that opening scene built up to a question: Why is the world like this? What happened to circumvent my expectations for this event? Naird, himself, answers this question toward the end of the scene: "New administration." Current cultural understanding is necessary to fully feel the implication is such an answer, but it does suggest that more unexpected changes will occur in the future. It also points an arrow into the next scene as Naird begins his duties as a four-star general in a changing world.

Naird is the main character of the story, but I found John Malkovich's character to be the most striking. He plays the role of a head scientist at the military base that Naird operates. Effectively, he is Spock to Naird's Kirk. The audience hears Mallory before seeing his face, hidden behind a massive book (*A Complete History of the US Airforce*) while unexpectedly waiting in Naird's office. His first line delivered in a bored monotone: "We need to cancel the launch." Naird responds: "NO!" Up to this moment, cues were laid out to give Naird purpose, a resolve that pointed him in the direction of launching a rocket by the end of the episode. Mallory could not have foiled such a purpose any more clearly. Again, expectations are established then crushed to create delicious conflict.

There we many such seeds were sewn throughout the pilot such as Naird's contentious relationship with his nemesis and former boss, his family's reaction to relocating from DC to Colorado, and an introduction to a long list of fascinating bit characters. But the narrative of his wife was particularly interesting because her's was a plotline without a clear a-to-b, cause and effect. We see her in the first scene where she talks about her excitement about moving into a new house reserved for the Commander of the Airforce, an expectation that was never met. Later we see that she acts with great disappointment over the need to move to Colorado. The next time we see her she's in prison. She gives us some clues in her dialog that she's seeing someone romantically in prison; Naird is the oblivious cuckold. But the audience is left wondering *why* his

seemingly boring, typical Stepford wife landed in prison.

At the end of the pilot episode, Naird and Mallory, in a celebratory mood, train a recreational-grade telescope of the orbital they'd successfully launched. From a POV, we can see a much larger orbital come into the frame; it's hull emblazoned with the flag of China. A mechanical arm extends from the Chinese craft to snip the solar arrays off of the US satellite like a kid snipping off the wings of a fly. Naird, eyes wide, shouts an expletive just as end credits roll. The expectation that the mission was successfully accomplished, that Spaceforce had launched an orbital, was foiled by a new external enemy (China) in the last few shots of the pilot in a cliff-hanger ending. Audiences can expect that the second episode will somehow address the new conflict with China.

Naird is powerful. He can command rockets and ride helicopters to make appointments. He can kidnap civilians without reprisal and have people arrested. He can make mistakes that cost millions of dollars and decisions that may lead to an all-out world war with China. But he is at the mercy of those who are above him in the chain of command such as the unseen POTUS and the Secretary of Defense. He is also at the mercy of his family despite trying to act like a commanding officer as a father. His daughter rebelliously flouts her father's admonitions while his wife calls the shots from prison. Even his subordinates disobey his orders with some regularity. Naird's guiding principle is to get Space Force up and running while trying to be a father and husband. *But no one takes Space Force seriously.*

It's fair to say that the rules for this world are political in nature. There is no magic but for the high technology of the near-future. Characters are based on recognizable tropes that exist in the world of politics such as a media manager, civilian contractor, general, scientist, POTUS, FLOTUS, and soldier. The premise is based on a version of reality that is only slightly exaggerated. After all, Space Force is real and the circumstances that brought it into existence are objectively unexpected if not ridiculous.

## Conclusion

In researching this Netflix Pilot episode of Space Force, I have come to better understand the importance of conflict in every scene. If your writing/shooting a scene that does not have an easily identifiable conflict, why? Why should an audience watch a scenario play out with risk or stakes or a change? The conflict must also arise from characters. In a later episode, Naird has a scheduled conjugal visit with his incarcerated wife. The audience suspects that she's cheating on him, so the prospect of such an encounter is already rife with potential conflict. But the scheduled visit is canceled by POTUS who is mad about a possible spy in Space Force. This sequence exemplifies the need for character-driven conflict in every scene. It turns the screws on Naird, ramping up the tension by giving him one more pressure point. Not only is the temperamental president demanding that he find a spy who may or may not exist among a cast of characters who may all be spies, but he is withholding sex from Naird until he gets the job done. The audience can see Naird, stressed, and sexually frustrated investigating the possible espionage throughout the episode. It makes the narrative more poignant, more intense.

In writing my own pilot, I can look at each individual scene and ask: What's the conflict? Who's causing the conflict? What is the expectation? How can I undermine expectations through character-driven conflict? *Every* scene should have a conflict.



(Above) Some of the more ornate costumes worn in the show by Hector Duran as Julio, Tawny Newsome as Angela Ali and Owen Daniels as Obie. These uniforms were designed by the FLOTUS character and represent a fun diegetic prototype. Elon Musk's input on the recent designs of space suits ("They should look cool.") casts such prototypes in a new light.